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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gap between instructional development (ID) theory and practice, then proposes a conceptual framework to illuminate how expert ID practitioners work in the corporate world. Historically, the bulk of instructional development research has focused on model-building: identifying critical ID component tasks and organizing and following them in a logical, linear sequence. This strict step-by-step procedure does not reflect the ID process as practiced in the field. Only recently has formal research begun addressing the critical issue of weighing and prioritizing ID tasks, the crucial decision-making processes involved, making judgments concerning quality of decisions, as well as the social, political, and cultural influences in corporate education. The context-sensitive approach, as opposed to the classical, mechanistic mode, will accelerate the development of a coherent set of ID theories and practices. The conceptual framework describing how expert ID practitioners work in corporate reality consists of five major themes: (1) cultural context; (2) situation analysis and synthesis; (3) client and other stakeholders; (4) performance capacities (capacity analysis and professional ethics); and (5) competitive advantages (business strategy, professional conduct, and changing roles). (Contains 14 references.) (Author/SWC)

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The Reality of Corporate Education

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Background

Widespread change is dramatically altering the traditional face of the workplace. Offermann and Gowing (1990) state, "The nature of work, the work force, and the workplace have undergone and will continue to undergo enormous change, bringing both upheaval and opportunity for those involved in organizations" (p. 95). This rapid change is creating new problems and conflicts which call for new interventions and strategies (Dick, 1993; Goldstein and Gilliam, 1990).

One of the emerging problems in the field of Instructional Development (ID) is the widening gap between theory and practice. Consequently, practitioners are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they would like to apply the well-structured theories learned from schools. On the other hand, they find that these precise theories are less practical in the field. All professionals in the "bottom-line driven" corporate world, must adopt a more flexible, situational approach in order to get the job done as smoothly and as cost-effectively as possible. Corporate ID practitioners are no exception (Boutwell, 1979; Dick, 1993; Rossett, 1986; Stolovitch, 1981).

This presentation will first examine the gap between ID theory and practice. A conceptual framework will then be proposed to illuminate how expert ID practitioners work in the corporate world.

Gap between ID Theory and Practice

Over the years, the bulk of instructional development research at the macro level has focused on model-building (Andrews & Goodson, 1980; Taylor & Doughty, 1988). Theoreticians identified critical ID component tasks, organized them in a logical, linear sequence, and suggested that practitioners follow them systematically and thoroughly (Gustafson & Tillman, 1991). But, this strictly step-by-step procedure does not reflect the ID process as practiced in the field, since it is what works that counts in the product-oriented corporate world.

Until recently, little formal research had addressed this critical issue of weighing and prioritizing ID tasks, let alone the crucial decision-making processes involved, or the judgment concerning the quality of decisions made. It is also noted that special attention is now being given to social, political and cultural influences in corporate education. Thus, ID professionals may have to immerse themselves in diverse human and social factors while inquiring into this line of research (Heinich, 1984; McCombs, 1986; Shrock, 1985; Tessmer & Wedman, 1990).

Based on observations of recent developments in both ID and other related fields, it also becomes obvious that ID theory and practice are greatly influenced by the social context in which diverse professions interact and enrich each other. Thus ID, in its nature and practice, must be considered an interdisciplinary profession. By taking this approach, the existing strengths, experiences, and resources of the ID profession can be optimally enhanced.

All this is leading to the emergence of a more flexible, situational and social approach to ID. This context-sensitive approach, as opposed to the classical, mechanistic mode, will accelerate the development of a coherent set of ID theories and practices. The implication which emerges from an examination of these issues in the literature and professional practice in the field is the urgent need to narrow the gap between ID theory and practice.

Professional Practice in Corporate Education

On the basis of the authors' lengthy experience in the field of corporate consulting, we propose a conceptual framework to describe how expert ID practitioners work in the corporate reality. This framework consists of five major themes, which are:

(1) cultural context,
(2) situation analysis and synthesis,
(3) client and other stakeholders,
(4) performance capacities (capacity analysis and professional ethics),
(5) competitive advantages (business strategy, professional conduct, and changing roles).

As Figure 1 illustrates, under the umbrella of cultural context, a project brings the practitioner and the client systems together. The practitioner strives for the project's success by conducting situation analysis and synthesis, analyzing performance capacities, and cooperating with the client and other project stakeholders. The practitioner operates within a framework of professional ethics, and exercises three competitive advantages consisting of business strategy, professional conduct, and changing roles.

In the following sections, although each key theme is addressed separately, it should be noted that each theme has a unique, sophisticated, interwoven relationship with the others.

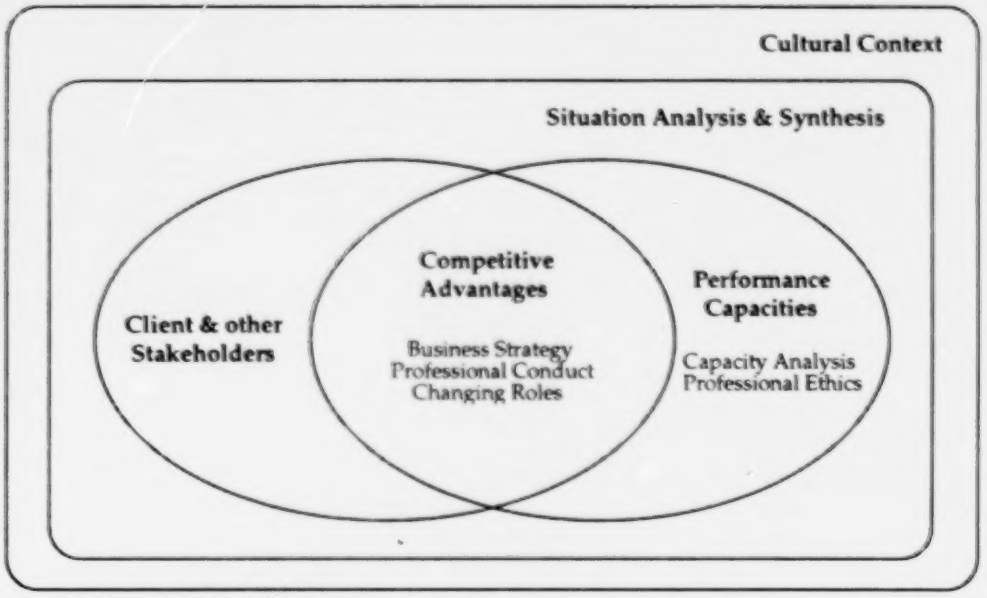

Figure 1: Themes of Corporate Education (from research on "The impact of situational factors on the corporate instructional development practitioner's decision making," Liang, C., 1994)

Cultural Context

In this paper, cultural context is defined as the specific context in which the ID project is carried out under a set of traditions, values, beliefs, and influences of the contemporary society. In other words, the cultural context of a specific society is closely associated with the shared values and traditions in that community. It engenders a complicated network of that group's concerns and beliefs in which the conventional traditions are intertwined with emerging contemporary issues. The new values resulting from contemporary concerns may conflict with the tradition ones.

This cultural context acts as a filter to help ID practitioners preserve those things which fit, but to leach out those which do not. It directs their conduct: it leads them to think, to believe and to act.

Situation Analysis and Synthesis

The real-world situations which corporate ID practitioners faced are dynamic and few are covered by the theoretical methods learned from textbooks. From the outset of each project, in fact even before they take on a project, practitioners need to closely analyze the situations they are likely to encounter, and to constantly synthesize their findings.

In other words, in this dynamic environment, expert practitioners change or modify their approaches as the ID process evolves. As each situation arises, they interpret its meaning by combining the new contextual information with

their previous information and experiences. Their subsequent interpretations bring into focus the risks and opportunities inherent in this new situation. The practitioners then take action to minimize these risks and optimize the opportunities.

Experienced practitioners are always on the alert for unexpected or rapid changes. They continually probe for relevant information, asking themselves if there are any better options. They flexibly adjust their mindsets and take action, first by integrating the new inputs, and then by visualizing the consequences of their subsequent choices. This ongoing process allows them to take account of their emerging insights and to revise their decisions accordingly.

For the most part, ID decisions in professional practice cannot be judged simply as right or wrong. Much depends on the practitioners' interpretations of the situations and on the possible outcomes they wish to achieve. Thus, situation analysis and synthesis is aimed at achieving full utility of the resources and the interventions available at that specific point in time. How well practitioners optimize this integration largely depends on how well they understand the problem and the client system.

Client and Other Stakeholders

To meet their client's needs and to carry out their projects effectively, experienced practitioners direct their energies to the right place by asking, "Who is the real client?" and by strategically distinguishing between "their success" and "their clients' success."

The aim of expert practitioners is not only to satisfy, but to delight their client and to impact the client's organization. To this end, they collect information which enable them to grasp the client's intention, agenda, policy, expectations, and standard. Not only do they comprehend their client's needs, but also those of the other project stakeholders. Expert corporate practitioners are committed to having a deep understanding of both their clients' industries and social dynamics which smooth out the process and facilitate their projects' successes.

Expert practitioners also create communication channels to listen to those clients who are closest to the problems and their solutions. They are sensitive to and follow their clients' organizational ecology to increase their clients' buy-in. These practitioners also play different roles in response to their clients' various needs and to the situations they encounter.

When conflicts arise among their clients and other project stakeholders, even at times involving the practitioners themselves, the practitioners may be caught in an ethical dilemma. This growing awareness of and concern for the stakeholders' needs and benefits demonstrates a new movement beyond "customer satisfaction" to "social satisfaction."

Performance Capacities

The practitioners' performance capacities can be divided into two categories: capacity analysis and professional ethics. On the one hand, capacity analysis includes an examination of the professional competencies, the resources and other tangible means necessary for the practitioners to carry out their projects. Professional ethics, on the other hand, represents the impact of spiritual power such as values, mindset and morals on the practitioners' decisions and actions. Unless the practitioners dovetail their performance capacities with their clients' needs, their projects are unlikely to have fruitful outcomes.

Capacity Analysis

In this section, capacity analysis is discussed at three levels: organization, team, and individual. It is capacity analysis at these three levels which allows each practitioner to predict the most productive route to take during a project, and to orchestrate those performances which will produce a coherent whole.

Organization capacities

Capacity analysis at the organizational level includes an examination of the history, mission, values, culture, leadership, resources, structure and politics of the practitioner's own organization.

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Team capacities

At the team level, an accurate capacity analysis helps the practitioners to define and bring together the appropriate capabilities and resources which enable them, as project managers, to lead their teams' efforts toward their project missions.

Individual capacities

Capacity analysis at the individual level includes a close inquiry by the practitioners into each potential team member's competencies and the resources at hand. This allows them to marshal and allocate the appropriate capacities and to make best use of them at the individual level.

In sum, the organization, team and individual capacities available to the practitioners must match their clients' needs in order to guarantee a win-win result.

Professional Ethics

The second category of the practitioners' performance capacities is professional ethics. Professional ethics represents the impact of spiritual power such as values, mindset and morals on the practitioners' operations. It is the criteria to which the practitioners refer when they wish to justify a decision. Professional ethics are objectively regulated by system rules such as laws, formal guidelines and societal norms, and are subjectively bounded by personal values, beliefs and cultural background.

Expert practitioners consistently demonstrate high ethical standards which guide their personal and professional conduct. Cultural context and the diverse conflicts of interest which arise among the client and various project stakeholders have a determining influence on the practitioners' ethical practices. Practitioners constantly mediate the tensions between a generalized duty owed to society and to their profession vs. the specific duty owed to a particular client. And, they reconcile the tensions between the ideal of a general principle and the reality of a particular practice.

Competitive Advantages

Expert corporate ID practitioners strive for their projects' success by exercising three competitive advantages: business strategy, professional conduct, and changing roles. It is these three competitive advantages which make these practitioners uniquely successful.

First, business strategy represents the collective schema of the practitioner's organization, which creates a vision and sets up a direction for future action. Next, professional conduct signifies the actions which mobilize all the resources necessary for the practitioner to enact the constructed business strategy. Finally, changing roles symbolize both the capacity for flexibility within a project and a movement toward continual professional development as the practitioner works in the field and grows from the experience.

Business Strategy

Business strategy is the unifying idea that links together the functional areas in a company and relates its activities to its external environment. It results in no immediate productive action, but sets a general direction in which the company's position will grow and develop. It is the means to the company's ends.

In implementing business strategy, expert practitioners go beyond success. Not only do they strive to satisfy their clients' needs, they aim to delight their clients. They push the limits of their professional boundaries, and promote their own organization's image in society. At the same time, they extend the focus of their concerns beyond their clients' needs to encompass the other relevant project stakeholders' benefits. This signifies a movement from "customer satisfaction" toward "social satisfaction".

Professional Conduct

Professional conduct is the second of the expert practitioners' three competitive advantages. While business strategy sets the general direction for development, professional conduct represents the practitioners' actions which enable the implementation of the constructed business strategy.

The professional conduct of expert practitioners is directly influenced by each theme discussed in this paper, or by various combinations of these. In striving for their projects' success, the practitioners' professional conduct is always aimed at achieving a win-win outcome for their clients, the relevant stakeholders, their own organizations and themselves.

Changing Roles

Changing roles is the third competitive advantage which expert practitioners exercise. Throughout each project, they wear "multiple hats" (they exhibit the ability to function in multiple capacities) to meet the wide range of their clients' needs. At the same time, they also apply the experience they accumulate from their projects to facilitate their own professional growth. In other words, changing roles represents the process of continual professional development from a single-specialty practitioner to a holistic organizational consultant.

But, no matter which roles these practitioners play throughout the course of their projects and their professional lives, they always play the role of competent helper.

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